

A Space to Breathe

By

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A Space to Breathe

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Abstract:

My Grandfather's experiences inspired a body of work based on ideas of trauma and personal experience. *A Space to Breathe* focuses on the idea of reacting to the notion of family history within the human body. In the works created, paint was used as a tool to describe how one experiences a memory from an emotional context. Each work created referenced a specific memory while the works together tell a larger narrative. I used my body to create the paintings, spanning my arms and moving around the surface. Materials were considered due to the fact that they were delicate and can change over time.

The work I make is based on my belief that as human beings we hold history in our bodies. My influences come from my ideas of historic trauma, genetics and personal experiences. Many of my family's stories relate to the human body. There are codes for the way to treat your body based on my family's cultural heritage and my upbringing. The stories that remain the most impactful are my Grandfather's experiences during the Holocaust, particularly those revolving around hunger. This historical trauma inspired the work in my thesis, *A Space to Breathe*, which addresses my memories of these stories from an emotional context.

Background:

My prior work focused on ideas of the human body in three different ways: what disease does to the body, the concept of a failed surgery, and revealing parts of the internal human anatomy. During this time I experimented with materials, structure and scale, color, composition, and mark-making as vehicles for communication. Family history continued to creep into decision making during the creative process. For example, at one point I made the choice to paint a figure on its side, split in half starting from the shoulder blade. Stepping back from the piece, provided insight that I had painted what appeared to be a fetus. I realized this referenced a dialogue about miscarried twins within my family history. An unconscious connection had been made between the painting and the family dialogues I was having.

In my experience, parts of memory can become diminished or exaggerated when re-examined at a later time. In the ongoing oral repetition of my Grandfather's stories there is always a part that remains the same and a part that is slightly altered. For

example, my Grandfather has told me many times about when he and others around him were starving. Details of the story shift but he always states his body was ‘swollen’. He witnessed people putting what he called poisons (things that are inedible) into their body to feel full.

“The hunger, it is walking death. Everyone is swollen. Anyone is trying to eat anything chewable. Mud, bark, other things that will kill you. A lot of poison. There is nothing to eat.”

This experience is unfathomable to me, yet I have felt compelled to try to think about what it feels like to be so ‘swollen’. He witnessed his grandfather lie down due to his pains and it appeared he fell asleep.

“I walked over to him with a feather and put it on his nose to see if he was sleeping, he didn’t wake up. The hunger must have killed him.”

Process:

The paintings in my thesis each encompass, a specific memory while the work together tells a larger narrative. When focusing on the marks during the creation of these works, specific emotional states were referenced. All of the pieces displayed together show the trauma of my Grandfather’s physical experiences during the Holocaust.

I paint these paintings on the floor where I can stretch my body to make them. Most marks are made within my reach or the span of my arms. The way I have used material relates to my understanding about body and memory; it can be delicate and can change over time. Sometimes the paint is used in a fluid manner, while other times

scratching, cutting or physical piles of paint are applied to engage ideas of various emotional states. Yupo, a polypropylene or plastic, was chosen as a surface because marks can be made as easily as they can be taken away. This reflects back on the notion of memory as variable. The Yupo surface does not absorb the paint like other materials. On it, water acts as a life source creating fluid marks while also containing others on the surface. Sometimes the paint is layered and piled, representing things like skin, human waste and the earth. Other times paint is ripped off of the surface, referencing the tension of holding on to some of these memories. Gouging, scratching and cutting imply aggression and anger. These marks deal with the violence and gut wrenching effects of historical trauma. The opacity or transparency of the paint plays a role in the content as well, referencing the ambiguity and metamorphosis of memory over time.

A Space to Breathe consists of seven large paintings on paper. Each piece is eight to nine and a half feet tall: each is five feet wide so that a viewer's body can relate their own body to the size of the work (Figure 1). *Open Wound* (Figure 2) focuses on the notion of making a physical wound to the human body while also contemplating the idea of how we hold onto emotional scars as human beings. The red oil paint is physical and slick; referencing bloody tissue while the flesh colored latex is matte and dull like a skin. The smaller watercolor marks show my hand and reference the chaos that created the wound. *Blood and Bile* (Figure 3) directly references the body by including intestine forms and a putrid yellow-green color exploding across the surface of the paper. The bodily forms start to break down and expand. This is my reaction to what it must of felt like to be 'swollen' based on my Grandfather's story.

All That Remains (Figure 4) alludes to a body standing up with little space to move and also references bodily fluids and death. Pink Fluid is reticulating on the surface to from a large mass of various materials (dish soap, corn syrup, Sumi ink, tea, mulberry paper, indigo watercolor). The materials are both edible and inedible, like my Grandfather's story about starvation. The materials are fragile and appear to be slowly falling apart in order to allude to the time interval between feeling hungry and having one's body become 'swollen' from starvation. *Our Hands in the Earth* (Figure 5) shows a thick piling of latex escaping the surface of the Yupo. In this piling, the viewer can read a series of blisters and imperfections on the skin. The skin is juxtaposed with cracked dirt or earth. Bodily forms pool in watercolor from the bottom. There are remnants of a figure's existence in this piece but the intention is for the viewer to be left to question what happened to the figural components. Another painting referencing skin is *Blisters* (Figure 6), where a central latex form shows thicker pieces of paint being pulled apart. *Blisters* is intended to suggest a common wound caused by heat and improperly fitted clothing. In the exhibition, *Our Hands in the Earth* was displayed next to *Blisters*. The thick latex appeared to pool from *Our Hands...* into *Blisters*, creating an implied physical connection between the paintings. Within *First and Last* (Figure 7), forms were painted on the surface and then ripped back out. The paper was gouged with a file and paint was used in a smearing motion. Many of the marks are aggressive, violent by the motion of my hand and direct. The large brown and textured form in *First and Last* alludes to human waste.

I believe as human beings we hold history in our bodies through our genetics and life experiences. The paintings reference my own emotional response to my

Grandfather's stories about starvation and other unfathomable situations he experienced.

A Space to Breathe focuses on the ideas of both a physical contraction within the body and a pause in a story to reflect and consider- to show how memories change over time and how one reacts to ideas of historical trauma.



Figure 1. *A Space to Breathe*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, KU Art & Design Gallery,
February 2012



Figure 2. *Open Wound*, 8' x 5', Oil, Latex Paint and Watercolor on Yupo Paper, 2011



Figure 3. *Blood and Bile*, 8.2' x 5', Watercolor on Yupo Paper, 2011

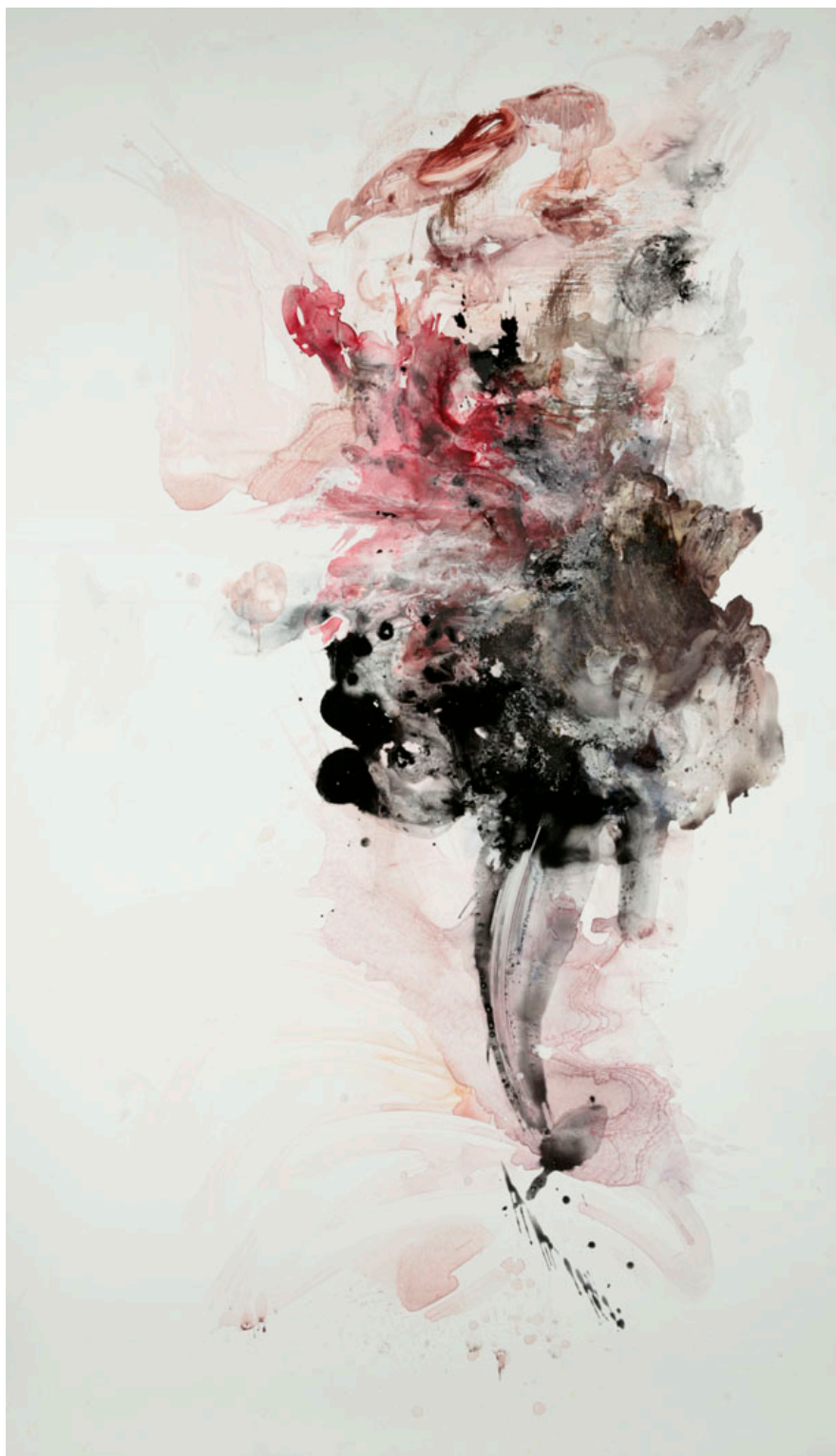


Figure 4. *All That Remains*, 8.6' x 5', Mixed Media on Yupo Paper, 2011



Figure 5. *Our Hands in the Earth*, 8.5' x 5', Latex Paint and Watercolor on Yupo Paper, 2011



Figure 6. *Blisters*, Latex Paint on Yupo Paper, 8.6' x 5', 2012

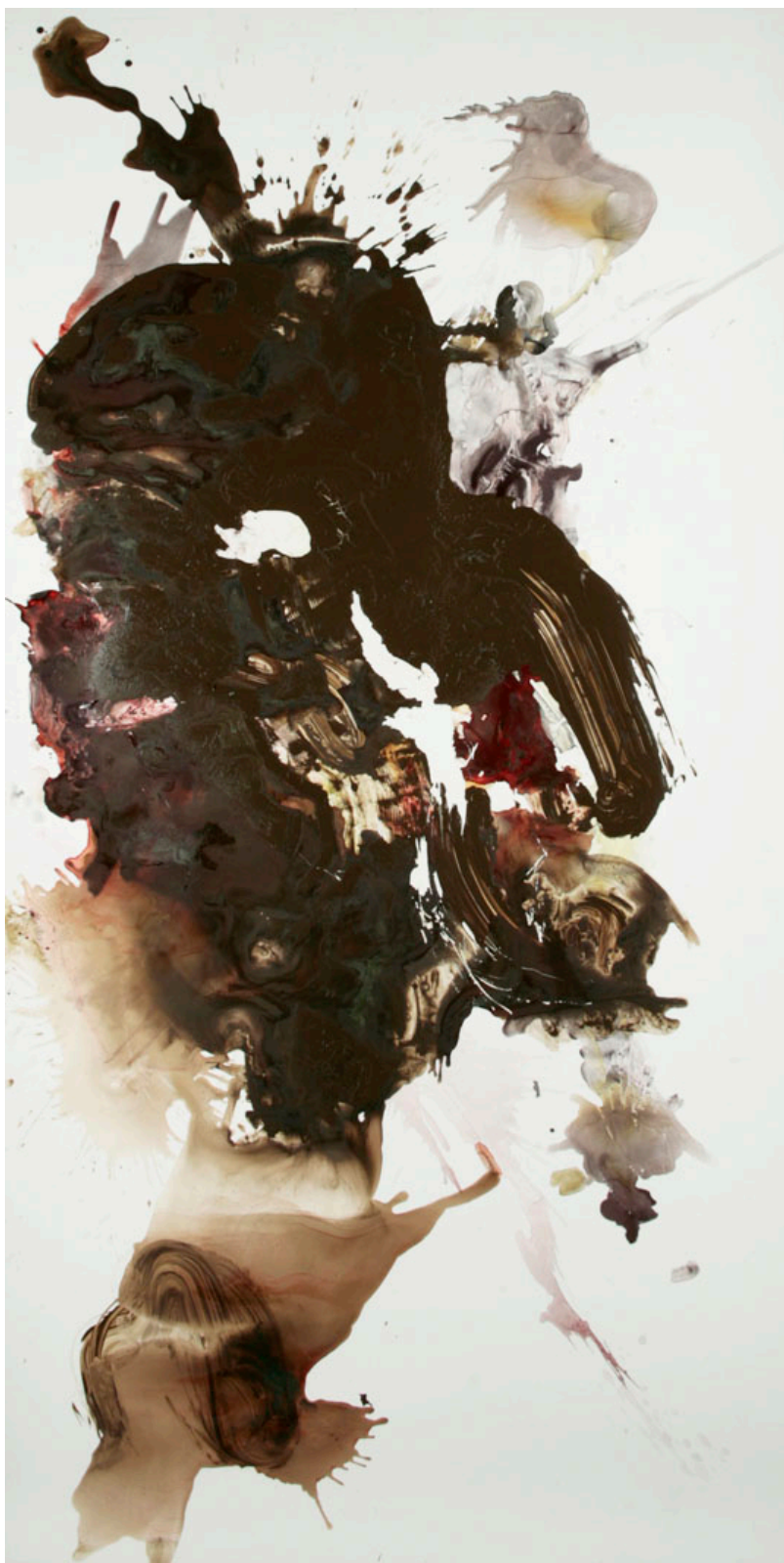


Figure 7. First And Last, 9.5' x 5', Latex Paint and Watercolor on Yupo Paper, 2011.